

[The Washington Post]

METRO

SUNDAY, APRIL 3, 2005

Council Chief Builds a Base In the New Montgomery

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Montgomery County's elected leaders recognize that their community is no longer as rich, white and leafy a place as it once was. Years ago, they began to address the problems of the new Montgomery — one that is increasingly diverse, urban and poor.

Even so, says Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring), a former civil rights prosecutor who is president of the nine-member County Council, Montgomery is "still a county with too many faces pressed against the window." Behind the glass of its Rockville office buildings is a leadership that in Perez's view remains too white, too Anglo and too unreflective of the community it represents.

Perez, a first-generation Dominican American, is an example of the solution he has in mind. In 2002, he

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ran for council by courting Hispanic immigrants and other minorities. His victory made him the second non-white person to be elected to the Montgomery panel. In December, when he began his one-year term as council president, he became the state's highest-ranking Latino elected official.

Parts of his agenda reflect the needs of his "new Montgomery" constituents. In recent months, he has begun working to toughen the county's laws against discrimination in lending. When the council held a public hearing on the matter in December, supportive blacks and Latinos filled the chamber. Council member Michael L. Subin (D-At Large), a co-sponsor of the bill, noted the "new faces" and "new actors" in the room.

Perez, a thin, narrow-faced man with a mostly bald head and a fringe of black, curly hair, enjoys rattling the cage of the existing order.

Last year he persuaded six colleagues to back his plan to have the county offer lower-cost prescription drugs — in all likelihood from Canada — to its employees and retirees. The plan drew more media attention than anything else the council did last year, in part because the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which says drug imports are illegal, is based in Rockville.

Perez says that the FDA's concerns about the safety of Canadian medicines are unfounded and that the administration is in thrall to the U.S. pharmaceutical industry. He is happy to have Montgomery join what he calls a "prairie fire" of rebellious states and counties determined to reduce drug costs. The FDA has hinted that it may sue Montgomery if the county puts Perez's plan into action.

But Perez is less an insurgent than a politician willing to fight a losing battle. His literary hero is Atticus Finch, the white lawyer in Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" who defends a black man accused of rape. The jury goes against Finch and his client is killed, but the novel celebrates the decency of the lawyer's struggle.

In 1994, Perez lost a civil rights case against a former U.S. Border Patrol agent who had killed a fleeing suspect by shooting him in the back with a high-powered rifle. "It made him realize," says Suzanne Drouet, a lawyer who was Perez's colleague at the Department of Justice, "that at a certain point your hard work and the rightness of what you think you were doing was not necessarily going to bring justice in the end."

Although he prefers the term "progressive," Perez is about as liberal as Democrats get. He spent much of the 1990s working for Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) and as a senior official in the Department of Health and Human Services under Clinton-appointed Donna E. Shalala. But his sincerity wins admirers across the political aisle. John Kane, the state Republican Party chairman, whose party has vilified Democrats as liberals out of touch with Maryland, calls Perez "a very open and honest political person," a man of "much taller timber" than some other Maryland Democrats.

One of his closest friends on the council, Republican Howard A. Denis (Potomac-Bethesda), says working with Perez has been among "the most gratifying experiences of my life." Denis and council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) co-sponsored the drug bill.

Perez, 43, grew up in Buffalo in the 1960s and '70s, the youngest of five brothers and sisters. His maternal grandfather, Rafael Brache, was the Dominican Republic's ambassador to the United States in the early years of Rafael Trujillo's dictatorship. After Brache spoke out against the regime in 1935, the ambassador was declared persona non grata by his own government. He



BY JUANA ARIAS — THE WASHINGTON POST

Montgomery County Council President Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring), left, is shown with council member Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac-Bethesda).

chose to stay in the United States.

Brache's daughter Grace, Perez's mother, married Rafael Perez, a Dominican who received U.S. citizenship after serving in the Army following World War II. "Politics," Perez says, "was my dad's passion," in part because it had cost his father-in-law his country. Both men risked their lives by defying Trujillo.

Perez's father was a Democrat unimpressed by centrists: "A Rockefeller Republican is still a Republican," he used to say.

Rafael Perez died when Tom was 12; he found a surrogate in a friend's father, a Teamster who had lost his job. The union helped keep his friend's family afloat in hard times, and their experience made Perez a labor supporter.

He received his undergraduate degree at Brown University in Providence, R.I., where he spent some of his free time at the dog races with a cook he befriended while working in a dining hall. In 1987 he received law and public policy degrees from Harvard University.

The high point of his six years as a prosecutor in the Justice Department's civil rights division was a 1995 case against three white men who had cruised through Lubbock, Tex., with a shotgun and a plan to start a race war. They killed one black man and wounded two others before police stopped them. A federal district judge sentenced the men to life in prison.

At the end of the Clinton administration, Perez took a teaching job at the University of Maryland School of Law and began consulting. In late 2001, he also began thinking about running for the Montgomery council from District 5, which includes parts of Silver Spring, Kensington, Wheaton and Takoma Park. Perez had dreamed of elective office since childhood.

Sally Sternbach, his main opponent in the 2002 Democratic primary, had spent years serving on redevelopment task forces, leading a parent-teacher association and heading up the Silver Spring Chamber of Commerce. By the measure of traditional Montgomery politics, she had done what it would take to win.

Perez, a Takoma Park resident since 1995, had a record of community involvement that was more limited: He served on the board of Casa de Maryland, which was founded to help Central American refugees, but it was crucial in helping draw Latino voters. "Nobody, nobody thought the Hispanic community could be mobilized to the extent it was," Sternbach says.

From his council pulpit, Perez frequently criticizes Republicans in Washington and Annapolis for shrinking social programs that help the vulnerable. "Local governments used to be the last line of defense; now we are the first and sometimes the only line of defense because of state and federal budget cuts," he says. For that reason, he has supported Leventhal's efforts to use county money to expand a network of community medical clinics that serve people without insurance.

Perez's ambitions may distract him from Montgomery in 2006. He says he might run for attorney general or Maryland's 8th Congressional District if the incumbents move on.

But he already has taken a step in the hope that Montgomery's elected leadership will continue to become more diverse. In January, on the day that former council member Isiah Leggett, the only African American ever elected to the body, announced his campaign for county executive in 2006, Perez endorsed him.